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WIDE ANGLE

NEW GERMAN CINEMA

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BOOKS

TO THE DISTANT OBSERVER: FORM AND MEANING IN THE JAPANESE CINEMA
By Noël Burch

The University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 1979: hardcover, $19.50, paper, $9.75, 387 pages, illustrated, appendices, filmographies.

Review by David Bordwell

In 1889, at the Paris World Exposition, Claude Debussy heard Oriental music for the first time. He wrote to a friend some years later: "Do you not remember the Javanese music, able to express every shade of meaning, even unmentionable shades, and which make our tonic and dominant seem like ghosts?" Debussy's attitude typifies the infatuation of our avant-garde with the East. Baudelaire, Monet, Von Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec, Whistler, Eisenstein, Artaud, Brecht and most recently Barthes, Kristéva and Sollers have found in the Orient a durable challenge to Western artistic practices. As usual, Debussy finds exactly the right timbre: the infinitely greater expressivity of this "primitive" music makes our own seem tied to fixed conceptions of form (tonic, dominant) and of meaning (Javanese music captures nuances which language cannot). Noël Burch joins this tradition, showing that to the distant observer Japan extends an alternative cinema with radical aesthetic and political implications. The result is one of the few books on film which is informed by a substantial argument.

This argument is all the more remarkable for not depending chiefly upon evaluation. True, Burch provokes debate about tastes, and many people will quarrel with, say, his denigration of the postwar work of Ozu and Mizoguchi. It will be a pity, though, if this book's iconoclastic opinions conceal its broader values. For *To the Distant Observer* is of great importance for film study generally, and its argument --that the Japanese cinema is central to our understanding of Western cinema --deserves wide discussion.

At first glance, the argument is hard to find. Not that the book's organization is unconventional--decades, filmmakers, films troop by in the familiar chronological order--but terminology and style do impede. An initial chapter introducing special terms is too important to be skipped (since it explains Burch's rather particular use of words like "diegesis" and "referent"), but it will slow down readers unfamiliar with semiology and with Burch's earlier work. Moreover, the style can be annoying. It is repetitious, often belligerent and deadly earnest. There are too many sneer-quotes ("Were not Japan's writing and much of her vocabulary, broad sectors of her arts and her most 'sophisticated' religion 'lifted' wholesale from China?") and too many tortuous sentences, such as:

The Red Bat, *like, apparently, many films of the same school, extended the denotative polyvalence characteristic of the cut alone within the Western codes to other types of shot articulations which, in the West, were pruned, as it were, of their polysemous potential and assigned a single, undisputed denotation/connotation set* (p. 112).

In addition, the style displays the curious habit of putting a claim in italics as a substitute for supporting it. Nevertheless, the content repays the effort, since Burch's argument sheds provocative light on how films are created and received in both East and West.

The Japanese cinema, Burch maintains, possesses unique features that can be understood only in a historical and political context. Centuries of isolation built up a homogeneous, insular society. Burch claims that even after Japan was opened to the West in 1868, it maintained its integrity because it was not colonized until the end of World War II. This political homogeneity affected the country's culture in particular ways. Japanese language, architecture, theater, literature and visual arts reveal a specific mode of representation different from that of the Occident. (Here Burch draws directly upon Roland Barthes' *Empire des signes* and Earle Ernst's *The Kabuki Theatre*.) Burch discusses several traits of the Japanese mode of representation, but two are worth noting here. One is the *inscription of textual production*. According to Burch, the Japanese mode tends to reveal the procedures that engender the text. He points to poetic traditions of the Heian era, to the visibility of the musicians and stage assistants in Kabuki and to the way in which the puppeteers in the *bunraku* (doll theater) are not concealed from the audience. This practice is in contrast to the Western mode of representation, which seeks to conceal the processes that create illusion, as did Belasco's offstage theatrical machinery and Bayreuth's invisible orchestra. A related characteristic of the Japanese mode of representation is the *disruption of narrative linearity*, particularly by segregating the narrative component from other

levels of the text. The Western mode saturates every element with story information; the Japanese mode sets narrative apart, designating it as only one function. Again, Japanese theater provides striking examples. In Kabuki, the actors perform mute while chanters declaim the text and musicians underscore it. Burch quotes Barthes' account of the doll theater as practicing three separate modes of "writing": the effective gesture of the doll, the effecting gesture of the puppeteer and the vocal gesture of the narrator. Burch finds the same segregation of narrative in Japanese lyrical songs and picture scrolls. Finally, what makes the Japanese mode of representation important is its implicit critique of the Western mode. Citing Brecht, Burch suggests that the Orient affords Marxists a tool for analyzing bourgeois representation and producing alternatives to it.

Burch claims that the qualities of the Western and Eastern representational systems surface in their respective cinemas. Our cinema utilizes the linear narratives, unambiguous signs and illusionist techniques characteristic of the Western representation in general. Editing, framing and lighting are coded to yield continuity, to center attention and to create depth. Whereas the primitive cinema (1894-1908) enjoyed a freedom from these constraints, after 1920 Western film practice raised the codes of shot/reverse shot, eyeline-matching and depth to the status of dominant principles. *To the Distant Observer* seeks to show how Japanese filmmaking has, in effect, criticized our Western tradition.

The interesting point here is that for Burch, Japanese cinema does not show up the dominant mode by simply ignoring it. This is not non-narrative, non-representational cinema. Rather, the Western codes are assimilated but placed within different contexts: a particular viewing situation and specific formal systems.

Between 1900 and 1930, Japanese filmmakers grew acquainted with the techniques of Western filmmaking. But the acquaintance was made within a particularly Japanese version of the film viewing situation. Burch stresses the importance of the *katsuben* or *benshi*, "a live commentator in the theatre to accompany the film with vocal explanations" (p. 75). Other historians have seen this practice as simply a quaint carryover from the theater, but for Burch, the *benshi* changes the very nature of the cinematic institution. In becoming simply a support for the *benshi* act, the film loses its "realism"; by reading the images, the *benshi* designates the narrative as such, as simply "a field of signs." Like his counterparts in the theater, the *benshi* sets the narrative to one side, splitting image from voice. The implications for Japanese filmmaking are evident. The filmmaker can leave to the *benshi* the task of creating a thick story texture, and the film can be more evocative. Ambiguities of space or time can be resolved or maintained by the commentary. Burch claims that the *benshi* rendered filmmaking more oblique and film viewing less illusionistic.

When the coming of sound eliminated the *benshi*, we might expect that films became more crude and literal. In fact, Burch argues, the Thirties are the golden age of Japanese cinema because tendencies of the Twenties style continued and flowered. In the Twenties, Japanese films used Western codes in several different ways. A particular device (say, a match-on-action) might function sheerly as a momentary, flashy effect. Or the device might have a repeated function, but its meaning would not be as precise as in the West; Burch points to some systematic but ambiguous uses of the swish-pan, the dissolve and dynamic editing. Most important, films of the Twenties tend to create patterns whose rigor exceeds the needs of the Western code. He shows how Murata's *Souls on the Road* (1920) creates a staggeringly complex but symmetrical editing construction and how Inoue's *Winter Camelias* (1921) offers a narratively useless but graphically systematic series of titles. Films of the Thirties climax this tendency to create forms that exceed the codes' requirements. Such innovations, Burch insists, were encouraged by the political climate, for the decade's jingoism intensified resistance to foreign influences and nurtured a "purely Japanese" film practice.

According to Burch, the masterworks of the Thirties assail Western codes of filmmaking on several fronts. Linear narrative is subverted by Ozu's empty transitional passages ("pillow shots") which stress, Burch claims, the materiality of the frame. Homogeneity of voice and image is shattered by Mizoguchi's decentered extreme long-shots, which create a field of images distinct from the dialogue. The effaced efficiency of analytical editing surrenders to a rigorous rhyming of shots in Shimizu's *Star Athlete* (1937). In particular, the depth of Western illusionism is violated again and again by an emphasis on surface--a tendency Burch finds in Japanese graphic design and in architecture. He claims that in different ways, Ozu and Mizoguchi block perspective depth and create a flat image that bars us from entering an imaginary space.

True to his thesis, Burch finds the country's cinema in trouble after World War II. Occupied by the United States for several years, eager to become an international economic power, Japan lost its identity. Its cinema became an imitation of Hollywood. Seeing Ozu and Mizoguchi as in decline, Burch singles out Kurosawa as a master at "deconstructing" Western codes and discusses a few filmmakers of the Japanese "New Wave" (notably Oshima and Wakamitsu) as turning the "objective Brechtianism" of the Japanese mode of representation to political ends. On the whole, however, the last part of Burch's argument becomes diffuse and elegiac, as he searches for traces of the greatness of the Thirties and laments the constraints on the contemporary filmmaker.

My outline of Burch's argument will have suggested the book's ambitious scope, and the work will doubtless be argued about for some time to come. A review can point to only a few areas of discussion.

Several of Burch's factual claims and inferences will need correction. *Sanshiro Sugata II* is not lost; three, not two, *Japan Film Yearbooks* appeared in the Thirties; there are some inaccuracies in the description of *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemums*; the stills printed from *The Only Son* (pp. 177-178) are unfortunately reversed. More seriously, Burch may misunderstand the *benshi*'s duties. Contemporary accounts claim that the *benshi* not only commented upon the images but actually assumed the voices of all the film's characters. This would challenge Burch's premise that the *benshi* provided a distance on the events on-screen, since one could argue that his mimicry enhanced the illusion. Burch's account of Thirties politics is lopsided, neglecting to distinguish between the disenfranchised, revolutionary right-wing cadres and the military clique within the government. This leads him to faulty inferences, for example, that of suggesting that Mizoguchi's films of the period were devoid of social criticism because they were not clearly leftist; but at this time, there was intense right-wing criticism of social conditions. Burch stresses that Occupation authorities censored film production in advance, but does not mention that the Japanese government did the same thing between 1940 and 1945. He assumes that Ozu was influenced by Hollywood only early in his career, despite evidence (in Donald Richie's *Ozu* and in the films) to the contrary. He claims that Mizoguchi was reluctant to switch to sound; in fact, Mizoguchi made one of Japan's earliest sound films, *Furusato* (1930). Most generally, Burch's use of sources is spotty. Many works in Western languages could have enriched the book: Donald Richie's several volumes, the memoirs of Mizoguchi's scriptwriter, Yoda, John Halliday's *Political History of Japanese Capitalism* and others. Of primary print documents, in Japanese or other languages, there is hardly a trace.

On the whole, Burch seems to me to underestimate the effect of American culture on Japan, especially on its cinema. In general, he ignores the film industry, which was in Japan a crucial mediation between native culture and foreign influence. Japanese studios consciously modeled themselves on Hollywood, dispatching technicians and managers to study production methods, acquiring machinery and personnel from Hollywood and copying American genres and script construction. The American model also affected how Japanese films looked and audiences responded. Directors have acknowledged the central influence of American films on them: American comedy on Ozu; Sternberg, Welles and Wyler on Mizoguchi; Ford on Kurosawa. Even during Burch's golden age, the Thirties, Japanese critics were complaining that their country's films were too derivative of Hollywood. When Burch does consider the film industry, he exaggerates the degree to which it was economically independent. In a crucial passage, he writes that Japan's avoidance of colonial rule: *contributed directly to the originality of the Japanese film, since it made possible the technical and economic autonomy of her film industry. From a very early date, Japan trained her own technicians, developed and printed her films in laboratories owned and operated by Japanese; she even manufactured her own raw film-stock. And, of course, this self-sufficiency of the infrastructure was a* sine qua non *for a 'free' interaction between the cinematograph and the cultural milieu* (pp. 27-28). The passage is misleading and inaccurate. In the early Twenties, many technicians were hired from Hollywood. Japanese cinema was dependent upon the West for machinery until the early Thirties; Western cameras and projectors seem to have dominated the market. When sound arrived theaters were wired under the auspices of American firms. Moreover, Japan imported all its raw film stock from the West until around 1937, when Fuji finally started producing its own brand. And Japanese firms had no qualms about permitting limited American investment; to put it crudely, the Thirties work of Mizoguchi and Ozu was in part underwritten by Paramount's interest in owning theaters in Tokyo. Thus economic independence could not be a *sine qua non* for Japanese filmmaking, for this independence did not exist until the late Thirties.

Burch likewise underestimates the Japanese viewer's aquaintance with the despised Western codes. He asserts that "the Japanese audience was unwilling to accept alien modes of representation" (pp. 94-95). This assumes first that the audience was homogeneous, which is not proven; and second that the audience was familiar enough with native traditions to prefer them. Yet one of Burch's key sources, Ernst's *The Kabuki Theatre*, claims that by 1898, Kabuki was sustained only by its connoisseurs and that film audiences found it unintelligible. It is similarly unlikely that the film audience--chiefly urban workers, many recently from the farm--were acquainted with the aesthetics of Bunraku theater, Heian poetry and picture scrolls. Worse, Burch offers no evidence for his claim that audiences did reject alien modes. The facts all point the other way. After World War I, Western and especially American films were hugely popular in Japan. It was state and industry action, not popular sentiment, that in the late Thirties drove out foreign films.

The theoretical intricacies of Burch's argument cannot be swiftly traced, but one may question some of its premises. The book's statements about flatness and depth in the film image proceed from an inadequate examination of the theory of perspective. Burch reduces depth representation to linear perspec-

tive, although there are many other cues for depth (familiar size, atmospheric perspective, etc.). He appears to think that Japanese graphic art flattens its images by refusing perspective, whereas Japanese art has its own system (that of "inverse" or "corner" perspective) that signifies depth in its own way. More generally, Burch's semiology posits probably too simple an account of how we watch films. The film image is a "facsimile" of the object, offering "perceptual simulation of the real." He goes so far as to claim that the diegetic effect occurs when "spectators experience the diegetic world as environment" (p. 19). This copy-theory illusion has been severely criticized by such theorists as E. H. Gombrich, J. J. Gibson, Umberto Eco and Nelson Goodman. Burch takes his conception of identification and the distant observer from Brecht, but his use of the playwright's ideas conforms to a remark made in *Theory of Film Practice*: *Today a better understanding of the "semantics" of artistic progress has made it possible to reread Brecht without taking literally his belief that politically committed–non-alienating–art must, by definition, convey a manifest political* message *(information)*. . . (p. xix).
For Burch, the Japanese cinema is "objectively Brechtian," but it seldom contains political criticism, only formal devices which break our putative identification with the imaginary world of the fiction. The extent to which this practice is Brechtian, let alone politically progressive, is a matter for dispute.
This is symptomatic of a larger problem in the book, that of an implicit link among the political, the economic and the ideological realm. Because Japan was not politically colonized, Burch assumes that it remained untouched. But during the last century, Japanese culture has been greatly affected by the West, an influence revealed not only in the Meiji government's promotion of industrial development but also in crazes for everything from ice cream and straw hats to radio and Deanna Durbin. Many of the tensions surrounding Westernization surfaced in the ideological sphere, but Burch does not address the possible contradictions within ideology or between ideology and other practices. As a result, he does not escape the determinism that haunts many Marxist analyses.

As these remarks indicate, *To the Distant Observer* will be discussed for many years. Its virtues, I hope, will continue to be appreciated. The book throws a long-overdue attention on significant aspects of Japanese cinema. This attention is enhanced by many fine analyses of particular films. Burch has a gift for concisely highlighting the principal interest of a film, and he never tires the reader by step-by-step explication. In his accounts of *High and Low, Throne of Blood, Page of Madness, Death by Hanging* and several Ozu and Mizoguchi films, the clarity and concreteness of his treatment are admirable. Of most general value, though, are his insights into Western filmmaking. Like Debussy and other avant-garde artists, Burch returns from his contemplation of Eastern art with a critical vision of our own traditions. His book contains fascinating suggestions about the function of repeated shots, of centered framing, of dissolves and of other technical devices. Consequently, *To the Distant Observer* succeeds in imposing a sense of a unified representational scheme at work in Western film style. If Burch sees this style as too unified and schematic (not to say scheming), he performs a service in turning our attention to cinema's most basic strategies--to the modes of film practice which cut across genre, director, writer and studio and which establish deep-seated viewing conventions. There *is* a Western mode of cinematic representation, and Burch is one of the pioneers in charting it.

David Bordwell is the author of a forthcoming book on Carl Dreyer to be published by the University of California Press.

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